

Womenopausal Interview With Kaitlyn Tiffany for the Atlantic

-- How long were you part of r/GenderCritical (do you know who started it?)

I was a junior member of the team. I'd been modding for about a year before the banned. I'd been picked partly because since I was UK-based and could cover the times when the US-based mods were in bed, and I like to think because I had the characteristics we look for in a mod: tough but diplomatic, able to see both sides of an argument, and chronically online.

And of course, I am a radical feminist and have been one for a long time which is the other thing they look for in a mod. Radical feminists see gender as inherently oppressive. That's why we criticise it. We don't see being a woman as describing anything more than your sex - the kind of body you have. Long hair or short, trousers or dresses, video games or ballet: these are all irrelevant. You're a woman if, and only if, your body is female, and vice versa. And as feminists, we recognise that patriarchy is a system in which women have been subjugated for all of recorded history - because of their female bodies, not because of their self-identification. That's the basis of our critique of the modern gender identity movement: if we disconnect the idea of being woman from the physical state of being female then we can't talk about patriarchy.

There's plenty of spaces where you can criticise the gender identity movement from a conservative position, where you can froth about Harry Styles wearing a dress or whatever else is disturbing your sensibilities. But that's not at all what we were about. They're not on our side and never will be. We don't support gender conformity; quite the contrary. That's why we needed our own space.

r/GenderCritical was started long before my time. I'm not clear who founded it. Sometimes it feels like unravelling internet history is as patchy as reconstructing the ancient past.

-- How would you respond to Reddit banning the community for hate speech? Do you think hate speech was happening in the sub?

Nobody thought it was going to happen. We'd heard rumours but we'd been punctilious in following Reddit's guidelines, so we didn't think it would apply to us. Other subreddits who had got banned on that day had a long rap-sheet of getting into trouble with Reddit's admin team. We had nothing like that. So if there was hate speech, no-one had ever pointed out what it was. I reviewed all our contacts with the Reddit admins and they were few and far between and very trivial in nature. So it was actually a tremendous shock. At that point, we had no idea of the behind-the-scenes activism going on between Redditors who were determined to 'clean up' Reddit by removing communities they deemed problematic, (while completely ignoring the huge amounts of misogynist porn that's still available on the platform.)

I don't believe there was hate speech, no. We were constantly barraged with hostile content that was legitimately hate speech: 'die in a fire terf', personal threats through modmail, violent images posted on the sub. It's the same content that you see captured every day on Terf is a Slur, for instance. Even when the conversations on our site got a little feisty and we had to step in, it was a pale shadow of the day-in day-out misogynist harassment that we were dealing with. Deluging our sub with pictures of penises was hate speech. In comparison, our regular users were nowhere on the scale.

But I think what we were doing was having uncomfortable conversations, and we were having them in a male-dominated space. That was always going to be fragile. Personally, I first decided I needed to talk through this issue after the attack on Maria McLachlan at Hyde Park Corner. That came to most people's knowledge over the court case where Tara Wolf was found guilty of the assault. But I'd been following the event on the night itself. Feminist women had tried to hold a debate event. They wanted to start a productive debate to hash out the rights clash involved in bringing in self-ID in the UK and had worked out a round table with LGBTQ organisations.

Throughout my career I've worked in the field of male violence, both as an activist and a researcher. I know the extent that men will go to if they want to abuse a woman. I felt sure that Self-ID would be exploited by some men and concerned about the lack of concern for safeguarding in bringing this in. I thought, at that time, that these dangers would be apparent to those advocating for trans rights, and that they would understand the need for safeguarding. So I was following this event closely, hoping that it would lead to fruitful debate where both sides could be heard and the work of framing a policy that worked for everyone would begin.

But there was no debate to be had. Asides from the feminists, every other participant had withdrawn from the event. Then women who turned up for the meeting were harassed, and then Maria was assaulted and injured. Women weren't being allowed to talk. Further women's meetings in the UK were also disrupted and picketed: going to see a feminist event was like walking into an abortion clinic in the Deep South, stringing your way between noisy protestors, most of them male. Once inside, you'd find exactly the demographic Maya Forstater found in her research: older, left-wing women, with a lifetime of work in social activism, often in the third sector, also some trans people, who were also concerned by Self-ID and had been silenced by a movement that supposedly represented them.

There was at the time, and maybe still is, an naive refusal to accept that some predatory men would take advantage of Self-ID. I thought it would be very harmful for people who transition due to gender dysphoria. In retrospect, I feel justified in my concern – 60% of prisoners who self-identify as trans in the British estate are in the most dangerous category of prisoner, or are sex offenders. And indeed, trans people with dysphoria found themselves unwillingly yoked to the likes of Karen White, who assaulted female prisoners in the women's estate, and Julie Marshall, who was found masturbating to child pornography in a women's ward in a hospital.

Raising any kind of question led to accusations of bigotry, threats to call your employer. Every nuanced concern in every area was met with the same silencing tactic. Concerned about a sudden, dramatic rise in young women feeling uncomfortable with their bodies? Transphobe. Worried about the long-term impacts of artificial hormones on young people? Transphobe. Cautious about giving away women's ability to access same-sex care in healthcare settings? Transphobe. Dubious about vulnerable women sharing refuges and prisons with males? Transphobe.

It was the silencing of concerns like these as 'hate speech' that made us a community. It's the point I reactivated my Reddit account and looked up this GenderCritical I'd heard about. It was out of necessity, due to the foreclosure of spaces in which we could speak freely, and the refusal of the other side to debate. Women have a right to talk about matters that concern them. Women have a right to create spaces for themselves. Women have a right to ask questions.

And we have a right to criticise accepted narratives. For instance, in my country, the Bank of England illuminated its premises for the Trans Day of Remembrance. However, no trans people were killed in the UK this year, or indeed the year previously. The Bank of England took no action to mark the two or three women killed every week during the 16 Days campaign against male violence which came a few days later. An act of remembrance of a purely notional trans person is a

national event: the death of hundreds of women is business as usual, barely worth acknowledging. That tells you something about where women stand now.

-- What has the experience of Ovarit been like so far? Is the culture different than it was in the subreddit in any way?

It's a very different environment, and the task of running it is different too. I used to get out of bed and spend anywhere between one to two hours clearing the moderation queue and then check in several times a day and do another hour, hour and a half all in over the rest of the day. And that was mostly clearing out abusive content from people hostile to our positions. I banned handfuls of users every day for the most vile abuse. The more normal – more complicated – mod business of sorting out arguments that have got out of hand, or reinforcing the culture of the community were a tiny part of the work, by proportion. Now, that's all there is. It's almost eerily calm.

But all the time we used to spend deleting hate content on Reddit we're now able to pour back in to developing Ovarit. We have much larger ambitions. We don't want to be the new r/GenderCritical, we want to be the new Reddit. On a smaller scale, and with a very different culture naturally. No r/degrading holes here, thank you.

Ovarit is a rare community in which you can always assume you are talking to a woman. Of our thousands of members, there's barely a handful who are men. And women's spaces have always been the crucible of feminism, from its very inception. I think we've all noticed how a conversation between women alters when a man joins in. Mansplaining wouldn't be a popular term if it didn't speak to something we all recognise. It's not just that though, it's that women are socialised to coddle men, and give them more respect than they deserve. Women blossom in women-centred spaces. They become less inhibited about showing their intelligence, their wit, and their creativity when they know they're not going to get torn down by men, or have to make space for the male desire for attention. There's no pressure to be ladylike. That's the joy of it.

-- What are your thoughts on growing Ovarit? I know it's relatively small now because of the invite code system. is the goal to get back to the ~ 65K of the subreddit?

The invite code system is in place while we work on increasing the capacity and infrastructure. At some point, we will fling the doors open. What happens on that day we don't know. We hope that by then all the best parts of Ovarit's culture – a supportive, women-centred experience, informed by feminist principles – will be so well-established that we'll be able to integrate newcomers. We've worked to get to this point, and we don't want that to change when we grow. It's going to mean that we and our moderators have to move from the creative phase, where we build the community and its culture, to one where we also have to defend it against the kind of attacks we had at r/GenderCritical. Managing that transition is going to be an adventure! But it's the best kind of adventure, because it's one filled with new ideas and new people to meet.

Our goal isn't to replicate r/GenderCritical. GenderCritical was only part of the network on Reddit anyway. It was the hub of a wider feminist network that included various other communities with a feminist perspective. I'm hoping that we develop in two directions: in one way, to provide a woman-centred space for discussion of everything that interests women – whether that's kickboxing or macrame, whatever – and also to provide more communities to talk and learn about other aspects of radical feminism, so I'm hoping to see conversations about pornography, prostitution, reproductive rights and surrogacy.

We don't have figures we're aiming for when we'll say, OK, we're done. Women have a lot to talk about. Big topics, small topics. Our goal is to provide a space where they can do that.